Time out of place

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by acatbyanyothername

Summary

Will and Hannibal survived the Fall, but things don't turn out as they hoped. Disillusionned, Will goes back to Lithuania in search of answers, only to find that some secrets are not as dead and burried as they are supposed to be.

Notes

For the Hannibal bingo prompt : Break-up. It really got out of hands but I'm happy with how it turned out! A big thank you to Pomia and Scruffy for cheering me on the way. Thank you to Lilibet my most wonderful beta.

The work is complete and will update weekly

Prologue

Once upon a time, a man was born from the sea. He kept the sea in his changing eyes and met a monster along the way. He didn't recognise the great black Beast straight away, a veil kept his eyes from seeing. But soon the veil was torn and the man saw the great Beast.

"Who made thee?" once asked the man to the great black Beast.

"No one," replied the Beast. "I made myself."

And the man knew the Beast was lying, because the Beast had let it slip that it had a sister once. And something had happened to her. But the veil wasn't completely torn yet and so the man let the question go.

Much heartache and betrayal later, the man and the Beast finally made a pact. They would be together until death did them apart and nothing would stand between them, especially no veil. Not after the pain of the first unveiling. They promised. No more veils between them.

But the great black Beast broke his promise.

Part 1

If Will was honest with himself, he hadn't planned on going back to Castle Lecter so soon. And certainly not alone. Yet here he was. Without Hannibal, and only a couple of duffle bags. His injuries had healed, at least the physical ones. Disappointment and the feeling of betrayal would be slower to fade away.

All the bullshit about baptism and rebirth from the waters of the river Lethe had meant nothing after all. The bitterness was choking. Maybe Will had been naïve, thinking they could finally be together behind the veil, no forts and secrets between them anymore.

Hannibal hadn't seemed to agree with him. Will hadn't noticed it at first, too busy healing, staying focused on the present to think much about the past. But they had healed. Together, slowly but surely.

How Hannibal had found and purchased their house on one of the multitude of Greek islands was beyond Will. But he was grateful. Someone other than him might have loved the sea less after their swan dive from the cliff, but not Will. Will still loved her and loved the island, far from crowds and bustling civilisation.

Hannibal had touched him at first. He had to, cleaning wounds, sewing them shut and then monitoring their healing. Will had done his best to reciprocate. He wasn't entirely ignorant about wounds. Especially not after Hannibal happened to him.

Crossing from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean sea had been a fever dream. Half remembered memories of being pressed against Hannibal in the narrow bunk of their boat, of fingers in his curls, and breath against his nape.

But the house had two bedrooms. Separated by almost an entire aisle. And Will had been struck dumb, robbed of his voice, protests dying in his throat before they could escape his lips as Hannibal bade him goodnight amiably and closed the door behind him.

Still. Will was stubborn and clung to hope. After all, physical intimacy had never been high on his list. Even with Hannibal. Being denied it didn't hurt too much as long as he could revel in other intimacies like touches and, above all, conversations.

He still knew so little about Hannibal, and though he had gotten better through the years at deciphering the man's tells, most of the time Hannibal was still a closed book. They talked about their days, of Will roaming the island and swimming in the sea, of Hannibal in the home.

They talked about the weather, too. And sometimes, they would talk about themselves. Of Will's past in New Orleans, where the heat was humid and even more oppressive than their new home.

Sometimes it was Will's turn to ask questions about Hannibal's past. He had asked about Hannibal's parents, about his uncle and his aunt Murasaki. Never about Mischa.

Not directly at least, he remembered the only time Hannibal mentioned Mischa, and how he had felt in his chest the reflection of the yawning chasm her name conjured in Hannibal.

But he wanted to understand Hannibal fully, and the puzzle that was the other man. And to do that, he needed to know about Mischa.

He never got any real answers. Hannibal could go on and on about Florence and how he became a man there, but anything further in his past was kept under lock and key save for hollow trivia.

They had violated each other's boundaries more than once during their acquaintance. Hannibal more often than Will, and didn't that leave a bitter taste in his mouth. So he had tried to respect Hannibal's boundaries this time, backing away when his prodding was met with stony silence and shuttered eyes.

But instead of opening, Hannibal had retreated further and further away, any touches that lingered from the boat disappeared entirely. Will's wounds had healed and there was no reason for Hannibal to touch him anymore.

They barely even shared the same space, Hannibal slipping away when Will came close, or never offering Will a place at his side when cooking, the only time Hannibal couldn't leave a room when Will came in. Hannibal never offered Will the handle of a knife and was always very careful to keep himself perfectly contained in his own space.

And the frost had crept in despite the sweltering heat of the graecian summer. They stopped talking altogether, and the silence grew until it filled every single nook of their home.

Suffocating.

Amid the red earth, the white walls and blue of roofs and seas, Will felt more adrift than ever before.

Discarding all the burdens of his past had left him unmoored and Hannibal was no anchor. He was the tall cliffs against which Will crashed again and again, battering at walls he had thought long since taken down. Invisible bruises had begun to bloom, so much so that he wondered if there was any space inside him that wasn't bleeding.

It had all come crashing down one beautiful morning, their home bathed in the golden light of the early day. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, maybe it had been Hannibal's silence, the absence of greeting despite Hannibal having seen him.

"Why won't you talk to me?" he had asked, standing in the kitchen, trying to muster the courage and energy to make coffee while Hannibal sipped his. Will's voice was hoarse from disuse. They didn't talk nowadays, walled into their respective silence.

"Because there is nothing to say," Hannibal had replied.

"Bullshit. There's plenty to say. You just don't want to."

"I already told you, Will. Nothing happened to me. I happened to me."

"Alright then. If nothing happened to you, what happened to Mischa, Hannibal? And don't give me anymore of this evasive bullshit. The truth, Hannibal, you owe it to me."

"Do I?" For the first time in days, in weeks perhaps, sanguine eyes had turned to look at Will.

"Why would I owe you the truth? For throwing me off a cliff, to a very probable death? tell me Will, I insist. "

And maybe Will was a fool, because he hadn't expected the words to cut so sharply.

"I didn't throw you off a cliff, Hanibal. I threw both of us. We're conjoined," Will had replied, voice cold. Such a simple thing. How could Hannibal not understand?

"I thought this was finally time for us to be honest with each other? No more pretence. No more forts."

Anger, like bitter chocolate, was rising in Will.

"You sawed my head open to try to pry all the things untold out of my brain. And I thought this time we were past this. I thought that if I asked you questions, you would let me know you. As you claim you want me to. But instead you shut me out."

Depositing his coffee on the counter, Hannibal turned, facing Will fully for the first time since their conversation began.

"Reality often comes short of our expectations, Will. What are you going to do now?"

"I fear we are at an impasse," Hannibal added, "I can't tell you what you want to know, but you won't relent until you've solved the mystery of Hannibal the cannibal."

"What…" Anger was robbing Will of his words. How dare Hannibal. How dare he. After everything they had gone through. How dare he compare Will to the likes of Chilton.

"Do you think I would do that to you? Do you think that's what this is? Do you think this is a petty victory, or worse, some kind of professional obsession where I can finally profile you and succeed where so many before me failed? Is this how you see me? A Pazzi, a Jack, a Chilton?" Will spat.

He couldn't look at Hannibal anymore. Never before had he wished for his glasses so much. But they had been left behind, forgotten in the house on the cliff. After all, he thought he wouldn't need them anymore.

"I threw my life away to finally be *with* you. I *finally* ran away with you like you wanted to that fateful night! When you gutted me open and killed Abigail!!" Will was shaking and his voice had grown in volume, bordering on hysterical, fist clenching at his side.

Hannibal by comparison was cool and his eyes opaque.

"Are we back to assigning blame then? Here I thought you wanted to move past previous offences. I do not understand why you are so insistent, Will, and cannot be happy with what you have. Please do not make me responsible for your lack of current happiness."

"I thought you were ready to be seen, not as the Chesapeake Ripper but as Hannibal Lecter, son and brother and friend. Guess I was wrong," Will cried. Anger was leaving him and tears now threatened to spill from his eyes.

He refused to be humiliated further and instead of letting the tears free, he turned heel without another word and went back to his room where he spent the rest of the day.

Sleep did not come that night either.

When the next morning dawned bright and early, Will came down only to find the house empty. Hannibal was nowhere to be seen and a frantic search of the house confirmed this.

Hannibal had left.

After agreeing to lay low and let Will be the one who would shuttle back and forth between their home and the town on the next side of the island, Hannibal had left and Will was alone.

No explanation. No note. Not a single acknowledgement.

Well.

If this was how Hannibal wanted to play it, fine.

Packing up his things went quickly, Will realising how little he owned, how little he had settled into the house. It made things easy.

Hannibal didn't magically appear when Will finished packing, nor did he appear when Will came down the stairs, duffle bags in hands. The house rang empty.

Will left without a backward glance. Reality really did fall short of expectation. Running away together wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. He wished he could have found the words to tell Hannibal that being vulnerable was okay, that Will was past hurting him.

There were other words. Words he kept locked in his heart, never letting them break past the ventricles in which they were housed. The tender things that whispered *I want to see you, please let me. Let me cradle and bear your pain with you. I am here* .

He had no idea where to go once he got back to the mainland. He wondered if Hannibal might look for him. How long it would take him to realise the house was empty. That Will wasn't there. Would he find it rude?

Will didn't care anymore. He was weary in a way he hadn't been after falling. Still, the sensation was familiar. The same weariness had gripped him once before, in the chilling winter of Wolf Trap when he had let Hannibal go.

Then he realised that he already knew where he wanted to go. If Hannibal refused to tell him about Mischa, maybe Will could find out for himself. Another trip to Lithuania was in order.

Part 2

Castle Lecter was cold in a way entirely divorced from having left the heat of Greek summer behind. For one, a milky mist had settled over it, flowing around Will like water, shrouding the towering spires, separating the castle and the grounds from the rest of the world.

Temperatures had also been dropping severely since he had left Vilnius and then the main road behind, to the point where the muddy driveway that had first greeted him upon his arrival last time was frozen, despite the fact that they were in the middle of summer.

Will shivered, after having spent months in the Mediterranean heat, the cold seeped right into his bones. The only sound he could hear since he had killed the engine of his car was the moaning wind and the snow and frozen brambles that crunched under his feet like bones as he approached the looming gates, ghostly in the mist.

At least some things hadn't changed since he had last stumbled upon these gates. The gates, with their massive rusty medaillons, emblazoned with the serpent of Lecter's family crest, were still closed by heavy chains. Fitting truly.

Again he had no key. And he doubted the gates would part for him. After all he was back here once again to know Hannibal, because the man just refused to let himself be actually seen. Hannibal in the flesh hadn't welcomed him, and Will doubted that the barricaded castle would offer him a warmer welcome.

He was quite ready to climb up the way he had last time, despite having more bags with him. He had recovered from their Fall and it shouldn't be a problem. Except that the gates seemed higher than last time, more difficult to climb.

The metal was also freezing under his bare hands and it bit deep into his palms. Will had to stifle a cry, unprepared as he was for the burning pain that radiated from his hands.

He was heaving by the time he managed to get himself and his bags on the right side of the fence, clothes torn from the brambles that clung to him, refusing to let him go, palms burned

by the cold. The rapidly cooling sweat on his drenched back was also a hazard he did not need right now.

Getting out of the freezing weather into somewhere warm where he could change his clothes was becoming a priority, and *fast* . Will didn't spare any glance to the grounds around him, not that he could have seen much of it. The milky mist had deepened into a full blown fog and Will couldn't see below mid calf.

The pallid light from his phone did not help much, as it barely pierced the fog. He wanted to find the hunting lodge. Chiyoh hadn't been away for long and most of the amenities he needed until he figured things out should be there.

So Will walked, and walked, and walked. The hunting lodge never came into view. Instead he had to fight his way through overgrown grass that reached his chest, stumbling over hidden roots and unseen depressions in the ground. After a bleak eternity, a towering mass rose in front of him, emerging from the white nothing.

It rose above him, lost in the milky fog, a great tower he hadn't seen the last time he had come here. There. Right in front of him, a black hole that must mark the entrance. Panting, heaving, limbs trembling, Will all but collapsed on the threshold, finally safe from the fog under a stone arch.

The doors of the castle should have been closed. The castle had obviously been left rotting for decades, and he doubted Chiyoh had actually set foot in it. Yet as he creeped closer on shaky legs, no chains adorned the entry door.

It wasn't right. Nothing about this was right and Will missed their sun drenched island. He missed Hannibal like an ache. But he had made it this far. He couldn't turn back now. Plus his sweat was already freezing. He had to go inside.

The great wooden doors moaned as Will pushed them open, revealing what must have once upon a time been a beautifully ornamented loggia. Which was all nice and great, but he was still in the open. He began to wonder if he would actually manage to find a way inside or if the castle was toying with him.

It was an absurd thought. No matter how vivid his imagination was, even in the throes of encephalitis, he had never ascribed sentience to a pile of rotten stones. This was a first and Will blamed the weather for it.

Despite these rational thoughts, Will was strangely reluctant to cross the open courtyard, unsure if he would get swallowed by the mist and lose his way again. Right hand against the wall, bags hefted on his shoulders, Will made his way until he reached another set of smaller doors on the other side of the courtyard.

Again it opened, revealing in a play of light and shadows, a once glorious interior laid to waste by time. Rubble on the floor, broken tiles with plants peeking through, peeling white painted walls and ceilings, and dust. Everywhere. There was not a single thing that wasn't coated in a spectral coat of floating particles, dancing in the meagre light beam of his phone.

Speaking of which, he hoped he would be able to make the electric emergency system work, or he would have a problem. His phone battery wasn't immortal, and though he was finally safe from the chilly weather, it wasn't any less cold inside the castle. Will had no doubt that many windows were broken.

Well. Will didn't need a whole castle for himself. A room with a bathroom and the kitchen would suffice for his needs. His steps echoed eerily in the empty endless corridors and Will couldn't help but wonder if the castle had been warm back when a family and servants inhabited it. He found that he couldn't imagine it.

But his thoughts were bleak, a mirror of the dreadful weather that had sapped any warmth from this place. He was also running on very little sleep, and was exhausted from the journey. The light from his phone was shaking slightly, proof of his tiredness. His limbs were heavy and the bags were lead weights on his shoulders.

Something or someone must have taken pity on him somewhere because it wasn't long before he stumbled on a room more or less intact with all the amenities he needed: a sagging couch, colour long since faded out, a four poster bed with washed-out curtains, a heavy carpet to ward out the cold from the floor and torn tapestries.

Depositing his bags on the floor, Will collapsed on the bed and prayed he wouldn't dream before unconsciousness claimed him. His prayers weren't answered.

The rooms glitter as sunshine pours through the window, illuminating your surroundings. Rich brocades and heavy tapestries hang on the wall. It might be summer, but the temperatures never climb very high, and it gets cold as soon as the sun goes down. The castle is big but it rustles with the sound of people.

You're running, but you're not scared. A giggle is trapped behind your teeth. You know you must be silent unless he finds you. And then the game is over. You've lost your slippers somewhere, and your bare feet don't make a sound as you rush through corridors.

Your feet are small, almost dainty, with their translucent skin and purple veins. Beware not to fall or twist your ankle. You are so small, easily breakable. You catch sight of yourself in a mirror. You don't see your face but your long golden hair, braided with ribbons is beautiful today.

You twirl and your dress twirls with you. Your smile is so big, your face aches and happiness bubbles under your skin.

You don't have time to stop.

Run little bird, run or he will catch you.

Will woke up. Unlike in his dream, the room was freezing despite the heavy comforter keeping him somewhat warm. He hadn't woken up screaming his throat raw, for which he was grateful, though there was no living soul to be disturbed by his nightmares.

To be honest, he had no idea where the dream had come from. The images were blurry, more feeling and fading impressions than solid memories. He remembered warmth. The warmth of the summer sun, of golden hair and happiness.

It only made the cold and loneliness of the present sting even more. The absence of a body by his side, something he never had, except his dogs, and yet missed all the same, stung. He was

moping. It killed any envy he would have to stay longer in bed. Turning on his side, he looked at the temptation of his phone laying next to him.

Black screen. No call. No message. Nothing. He was alone.

Getting up, Will wanted nothing more than to scrub away the loneliness and the cold under a warm shower or in a bath. That is, if there was any electricity at all left in the derelict castle that smelled of damp, dust and rot. Dim light from outside struggled to push away the shadows, despite the advanced morning hour that his phone displayed.

Will already knew the castle had cellars. Now all he needed to find was the basement. His steps echoed oddly on the stone floor, one, two. *Three* . *Four* . One, two… *three*... *four* . And yet, when he turned, the corridor was deserted. His mind must have been tricking him. It wouldn't be the first time, and disjointed tiles weren't reliable. It could also very much be water dripping somewhere rather than another step of footsteps conjured by his nerves on edge.

He ploughed on, resolute to find something to do to occupy his days, unless he fell into a pit of self-pity, or worse, let his thoughts stray to Hannibal. Will had expected a maze, but as he discovered, the castle was structured around three main courtyards, each with a two-story loggia. Finally he found what looked like the kitchen courtyard, the farthest away from the entrance courtyard he had come through last night.

The kitchen must have been beautiful once, like the rest of the castle. A yawning fireplace, decades cold, wooden shelves on the wall and a massive central stove, occupied the space.

But the dull copper pots and pans were not hung on the wall where their hooks were, nor were they tidily stocked away from visitors' eyes. Instead they laid strewn everywhere, in pitiful disarray, some of them dented, maybe from the impact of the floor. The dresser doors had been torn open and left hanging, almost ripped out of their hinges.

It was jarring. It was wrong. Never would Hannibal tolerate a kitchen in such a state. This was a tragedy in and of itself. But it wasn't Will's. He moved on.

Luck wasn't on his side. There was no basement. Which meant he had to go back outside. A quick glance let him know that the same milky whiteness of yesterday had swallowed the outside once again. Despite his clean clothes, grime clung to him like tar. Or so it felt.

Resigned, he pushed the kitchen door and came out into the courtyard. The mist embraced him greedily once again, its chill just as merciless as the day before. Right hand against the wall, he hoped this excursion would prove more fruitful than yesterday's and this morning’s.

It didn't. Curse the castle. Only three courtyards, and yet no matter how, he seemed unable to find one that would allow him to exit the main building. Round and round, he went, inside, outside, up the stairs, through the first floor gallery of the loggia, down the stairs, into another courtyard, and yet none of the doors seemed to lead where he wanted them to.

Will was going crazy. No echo followed him, the sound muffled by the fog, but now he was chased by giggles. High pitched in childish joy. At least someone was enjoying his misery.

He was ready to give up when a light pierced the nothingness. A merry thing that blinked at him, almost taunting. But then, what did he have to lose? More time? What did it matter? He had no idea which courtyard he was in, but he crossed it in a few quick strides.

The light never seemed to get closer to him, maybe it was the sun finally peaking through the clouds, who knew. Certainly not Will. At least it led him out of the labyrinthic courtyards.

He finally arrived in front of a small run down building, not so different from all the others, with its white walls and red slanted roof. Yet when he pushed the heavy wooden doors, he was met with the electric generator he was looking for.

As soon as he had crossed the threshold, the light had disappeared, leaving him only with the dim natural light from outside. Nevertheless Will set to work, taking the generator apart to assess the potential damage to make sure he could power it up.

The rest of the day slipped through his fingers, engrossed as he was in this new puzzle, forgetting for a time the oddly unsettling castle all around him. By the time the poor daylight

was replaced by darkness, the generator was humming under his hands, ready to be put to use.

Will had no idea how he would make his way back through the night when he had kept losing his way during daytime. He was grimy, and sweaty and he feared freezing temperatures.

But as he stepped out into the night, shivering in the cold, he was gripped by the sudden desire to see the old fountain again with its stone rim and dancing fireflies, though he doubted any of them would be out. Still, it was worth a shot.

As if summoned by his thoughts, the twinkling light was back. Maybe the fireflies were out after all. The fountain was still there, with the lonely stone angel on the top of its column, standing vigil over the basin, as empty of water and life as the rest of the castle.

Will sat down on the rim, smooth from the many generations of Lecter children that had no doubt sat in the very same place. Where Hannibal and Mischa must have sat. It was quiet here, and Will relished the silence, as he slid down to rest his head against the rim. He waited. The mist hadn't seemed to reach so far and he could admire every detail of the face of the stone angel above him.

Run little bird, run unless you want them to catch you.

Run, he told you. Hide. Don't let them see you.

It's a game he said, but you've seen the splashes of crimson on his clothes.

"It's nothing," he said. "Only some paint, you know how things are."

You know. And you know your brother. He's immaculate and despises mess. He would never soil his clothes like that, even if he was painting. But you don't want to think of what it could be.

Who does it belong to?

Your brother is wise, and you love him. But you want the embrace of your mom, the solid shape of your father. They are nowhere to be seen. Only your brother.

Run little bird, run.

Don't let them see you.

The castle is noisy. Not the happy kind of noisy with the maids and butlers, valets and grooms.

It echoes with the sound of heavy steel boots. It smells like something sharp and burnt charcoal.

You want to cry, but a Lady never cries.

You want your brother.

But he isn't here.

Will awoke with a sharp gasp, confused about where he was. Losing his equilibrium, he felt himself fall backward. Still too confused, he couldn't do anything to stop his fall and his head hit the stone sharply. Stunned, it took him a minute to get his bearings back.

He had fallen asleep outside, while waiting for the fireflies to come out. And out they were, more than he had ever seen in one place, dancing an ethereal glowing ballet all around him. Slow and lazy they twirled in the cool air, some of them draping the stone angel and column in a cloth of light, illuminating the scene as in daylight.

For the first time since coming here, Will heard birds in the trees and the rustle of leaves, something other than the stifling silence that had taken hold of the castle grounds. Even the air seemed warmer, cool instead of chilly, a breeze stirring his clothes and curls.

It was beautiful.

He lingered there, unwilling to move and part from the serenity of the moment, limbs languid and stress-free, thoughts quiet, phone nowhere in sight. But he was getting cold again.

Wil got up, without any idea of how long he had been asleep. The night must have been well underway.

Getting back to the castle and his room on the first floor proved to be surprisingly easy. There was no shower in the bathroom attached to the room he had chosen, but a heavy copper bathtub that he filled to the brim with hot water, the result of his hard work of the day and the water heater he had managed to power back on.

Steam rose. Unconsciousness beckoned. Will slipped under the water… down… down.. down…

He floats suspended in the infinite sepulchral depths of water alone, until he sees her. She's as black as Hannibal in his monster form. But whereas her brother is all solid, a presence that can't be ignored or denied, she blurs at the edges, fading into wisps of smoke.

She floats alongside him, illuminated by an eerie emerald light. Her mouth moves from the centre of a skeletal face but he can't make out the words. Still she reaches for him, with bony claws longer than his forearm.

He should be terrified. Will is mesmerised instead. Here she is. The one he had wanted to meet for so long.

He reaches back to her, but she dissolves between his fingers like smoke.

Will woke up, choking, shivering, and clammy from the water that had gone cold. He was getting rather fed up with the cold. He longed for the afternoon heat on their little island, hours spent leisurely in the shade, waiting for the temperature to go down a little.

He was alone, in a hostile environment and had never felt so lonely despite being so close to finally finding out the answers he had searched for. Will sighed and heaved himself out of the water, intent on putting some clothes on. The lights have gone off sometime when he was asleep and a murky green light has replaced the golden glow of electricity.

He was as dry as he could be, and instead of going back to sleep, *he didn't want to, his dreams had been disturbed as of late* , he pulled on another set of clothes. He wanted to be awake for whatever was left of the night.

He didn't have to wait long. A shiver of displaced air was his only warning and he watched as skeletal shadows stretched on the wall opposite him, the same hands he had seen in his dreams.

"Hello Mischa."

Part 3

Will had done his best to scrub New Orleans and Louisiana from himself. But some things remain, no matter how hard you erase your accent. The supernatural is one of these. You don't grow up in New Orleans without having a brush with the dead that have not quite left yet.

Will was a rational man. He didn't believe in magic or monsters. But trauma? That he did believe. And trauma lingered. A stain that never goes away. And it could fester.

Castle Lecter was festering, Will could feel it, ants crawling up under his skin, a prickle at the back of his head, a sour taste on his tongue.

But he wasn't afraid. He didn't know what was at play here, but he knew he was safe, sitting on the dusty comforter in a long abandoned room, waiting for the ghost of the girl whose loss had set Will's world in motion by putting Hannibal on his path.

She was exactly like the floating ghost he had seen in the water, dressed in funeral black, her dress barely concealing the utter lack of flesh on her. She was all bones and skin, as black as her attire, and she floated toward him.

"Šalta."

"Šalta."

Again she reached out to him, small, so small, fingers like claws clamping down on him. Will almost screamed at the searing cold of her touch.

" *Didysis bróli* ," she moaned, weeping empty black sockets looking up at him where her eyes should have been. Will looked at her, feeling mirror tears wetting his eyelashes.

"I don't understand you Mischa," he whispered roughly in english. She wailed again in lithuanian, seemingly unaware of his words, and Will tried again.

"Mischa. Tu parles français? Est-ce que tu me comprends?"

The wailing stopped, replaced by hollow hiccoughs.

"Oui," she answered, lipless mouth forming the words.

"What happened to you?" Will went on, summoning memories of cajun french and humid Louisiana heat.

"Men. Bad men. Must hide."

He wanted to reassure her so much his teeth ached with it. His arms were already halfway around the black ghost before he realised what he was doing. These weren't his emotions. He was sure of it. But he was alive with the need to protect this little black ghost that threatened to fade in his arms.

He gave into the impulse, hugging her long dead form, or trying to. His arms passed through her. It seemed that she could touch him, but he couldn't touch her. Still, he tried again, opened the floodgates of his empathy - and found nothing. No, not nothing. A wall that slammed into him, stunning him back to himself. Mischa was dead, and despite whatever after image he was holding in his arms, she was inaccessible.

"Where are the bad men?" Will soothed, a little awkward, unused to holding a child, especially one as solid as smoke. He hadn't even been able to hold Abigail when Hannibal slit her throat in front of him that fatal night in Baltimore. If Abigail could have been theirs, Mischa had been Hannibal's, and he wanted to protect her like he hadn't been able to protect Abigail.

It didn't matter that Mischa was already dead, the blond hair of his dreams now turned black like the rest of her, reduced to pitiful tendrils of smoke. She was still beautiful. Mischa didn't answer, seemingly only able to let out a whimper.

She didn't need to answer. The temperature dropped again and Will heard it. Boots. More than one person. Heavy rhythmic footsteps. *Soldiers* .

"Hide," he hissed to the girl in his arms. He had no idea what awaited them, but he knew one thing for sure. He wouldn't let anything happen to Mischa anymore.

Hide, little bird. Don't let them find you .

They came barging in, emaciated ghosts, so tall they almost reached the ceiling, limbs elongated, and gaunt with hunger, teeth and nails closer to beasts than men. Any individual features had been erased, leaving only grimacing skulls under soldier's caps. But each bore a distinctive wound ranging from usual to nightmarish, the leader bearing several leaking wounds shaped like an "M" oozing black tar in a parody of the Dolorous Stroke.

They advanced with the steadiness of a Fate that had already come to pass, against which Will was powerless. Will may as well have been a ghost for all the attention the intruders paid him, and the irony wasn't lost on him.

Tilting their head the predators smelled the air, and hideous grins stretched their mouth, exposing missing teeth. Like animals they lunged toward Mischa's hiding place, tearing the furniture apart in their haste, splintering wood and breaking stone. Mischa stood no chance as they dragged her whimpering and sobbing into the light.

He had seen enough. The strange paralysis that had taken hold of Will, freezing his limbs into place as he watched the horror unfold melted from him. He lunged for the nearest ghost, teeth bared, a snarl tearing itself from his throat.

He never touched the grimacing ghost. Like with Mischa, he passed through his target, barrelling into the wall at full speed. The last thing he heard before losing consciousness from

the shock and the searing cold that stabbed him was the hateful laugh of Mischa's tormentors.

Will woke up in a cell. A small, cramped space, in which Will could neither lay nor stretch, forced to crouch instead. For a moment he thought he was back in the cellars, in the cell that Chiyoh's prisoner had inhabited for so long. Dark and damp, it smelled of rot.

It certainly smelled like the cellars, but it looked nothing like the one he had seen with Chiyoh. Gone were the low ceilings and barrels, replaced by a maze of stone pillars, arches, portcullis, beams, wheels, chains, stairs and cells, connected by footbridges, barely large enough for one person to stand on, all stretching toward an invisible ceiling.

He could hear Mischa from another cell, but he couldn't see her, trapped as he was. Shivers wracked his frame, his bare feet hurt and stung from the cold but none of it mattered. *Mischa* mattered.

His head throbbed, dry blood had plastered his curls against his skull and made it difficult to open one eye, but he was beginning to understand the twisted logic of the castle. Still hesitant, Will extended a hand toward the hearse that sealed the entrance of his cell. And watched it pass right through.

There was no exit in sight, but at least he was free to move in this new nightmarish space. If he thought finding Mischa would be easy, he was sorely mistaken. Her soft cries seemed to come from everywhere at once, the echo bouncing around, leaving Will feeling even more disoriented.

So he closed his eyes, blocking everything else, and just listened. Miraculously, a sound managed to break apart from the rest, like the fluttering heartbeat of a bird, going rabid in fear. Will opened his eyes, unwilling to risk his death by trying to navigate the place blind.

The sound was coming from somewhere under him, but he had no idea how far below the little countess's ghost might be. The other problem was that, well, Will didn't really see *any* way to go down from the sort of bell tower that was his cell. There were no stairs or rope, and while didn't trust the physics of the place, he had no doubt the usual laws of gravity still applied to him, and he didn't fancy falling to his death in an abandoned castle.

Then Will looked up and just above his head, low enough he could touch them if he extended his arms, he saw great wooden beams stretching across the space. His way out. His body screamed when he hoisted himself up, splinters of wood embedding themselves in his already bleeding palms.

Once he had secured his footing, he began to walk, careful of his hurt feet and of the yawning chasm that waited for him to stumble or make a wrong move. Mischa kept crying, terrible little sobs that filled Will's chest with an echoing despair. He kept moving.

From one wooden beam to another, like rungs of a ladder Will began his careful descent, guided by Mischa's cries. They grew clearer and clearer, louder and louder, Will knew he was finally nearing the end of his ordeal.

No other sound broke the eerie silence all around them, no groans from the wood under his feet or clunking from the hanging chains and portcullis. Will couldn't even hear his own laboured breathing, though his chest rose with each breath.

But another sound rose suddenly, utterly out of place. Rough voices intoning a soft melody in the same foreign language Mischa had used and whose words escaped Will. Soft lilting sounds flowing like water.

The sobs stopped. Quiet fell again and Will finally saw them, monstrous shapes bent around something just out of sight. It wasn't hard to know what it might be. Except for Will and these tar-like ghosts, there was only Mischa. And a glint of something sharp and wicked.

Will didn't see. But he heard. He heard her voice rise in terror and he heard her screams, brutally cut off when the heinous glint came down. Again. And again. Silence again. Replaced by slurping noises.

Frozen in place, Will watched helplessly from his perch as the grinning devils lifted their heads, grimacing skulls looking more tangible than ever and bade him to come closer with one hand, the other holding a bowl of soup, black steam curling above it.

Hunger, ravenous and all encompassing cramped his stomach, pangs going straight through his body. Suddenly he was *desperately* hungry. And the steam smelled better than any of the dishes Hannibal had ever cooked for him. He was hungry, so hungry he wanted to claw his stomach out.

The ghosts smiled even wider.

"Come and taste, we know you are hungry," one said, gigantic claws cradling the bowl almost delicately.

"The little bird isn't very filling." Added another ghost, arm almost as long as his entire body, stretched out as if to catch Will.

"The little bird is only skin and bones," sang a third one.

Limbs weak from hunger, dizzy, Will didn't even manage to cry when he lost his footing and the wooden beam under his feet disappeared. White noise filled his head as he plummeted through the air, a scream frozen in his lungs, tongue bitten so hard Will could taste blood, limbs trembling as he picked up speed.

Faster and faster he fell.

Closer and closer the ground came, like a dark hole of gravity, sucking him toward the middle of the ring of ghosts.

Hitting the ground should have hurt. His bones should have broken or shattered and yet nothing of the sort happened. Will fell. And felt the mattress under his back, hard, pressing into his spine and shoulders.

He wasn't falling. He was in bed. Weak light streamed through the windows. It was morning. And Will was alone once again. Phone black and dead next to him.

Getting up and taking a look outside yielded no unexpected results. The same milky limbo that had first greeted him when he trespassed on the ground still held the castle and Will prisoner.

Will checked his hands and bit back a curse.

They were raw and bloody just like they had been in his dream.

He didn't know whether to be relieved or not. If something was playing tricks on him, at least it wasn't his mind, unless Will had taken to sleepwalking again.

Encephalitis relapses weren't unheard of after all, and it had ravaged his immune system. Staying in an old and abandoned castle may not have been the smartest or safest thing to do. But then Will never liked to take the easy way out, did he?

If this wasn't a trick of his mind—and Will knew it wasn't, he knew what kind of crazy he was, and this was *not* it—then he had no idea what he was in for. And he wasn't keen on repeating yesterday's experience. Vertigo and phantom pangs of hunger battled for dominance when he cast his mind back to the wretched space he had found himself in.

Will looked back outside, the dusty curtains still relatively spared from moths and other insects. Daylight. His mind was beginning to see a pattern. He would be safe, or as safe as he could be as long as night didn't fall.

The day passed in a confused state of limbo. The generator only seemed to provide hot water. No electric appliance seemed to work. Plugging his phone in to power it up proved to be a failure. No way to reach the outside, not that Will was even certain he wanted to. Not after how he and Hannibal had parted.

So Will idled away the hours, never straying far from his room. He wasn't hungry, or at least no food he could think of alleviated the all-consuming hunger he had felt when presented

with the broth. Soon enough the milky light dwindled and faded, and darkness settled over the castle.

Will didn't bother settling under the covers. Instead he sat on the bed and waited. Again the shiver of displaced air, and absolute silence creeped over him. Again, she appeared, floating in her funeral attire that dissolved into smoke, extended hands casting elongated shadows over the wall.

He waited.

Like the night before, she floated toward him, her soft voice echoing in the silence around them.

"Šalta."

"I'm not your brother Mischa," Will replied softly in french, taking care not to spook her. How the tables had turned. Any lingering fright at seeing her ghost had been ground to ash when he had borne witness to her fate. Only sadness remained. Something too deep and old to bring tears in his eyes.

"Where are the bad men, Mischa?" Will asked. But Mischa didn't seem to understand. Gripped by a sudden terror, her little frame was beginning to wrack with shivers. Again her voice began to rise in a wail.

"Men. Bad men. Must hide."

As if summoned by her words, shadows pooled on the wall at the end of the corridor leading to Will's chosen room. Nothing more than an amorphous blob at first. Then a limb tore itself out of the gurgling mass in a resounding crack. Followed by another. And another. Each split rang out, louder than the ones before, drowning Mischa's cries until all the nightmares had regained their individual shapes, gaping wounds and all.

There was nowhere for Mischa to escape as they prowled inexorably closer and closer. This time, Will wouldn't let them come near Mischa. There was a gun in the nightstand that he had taken when leaving Greece. Will wasn't naïve enough to think it would be of any use against the monsters, but hopefully it would serve as a distraction.

It did not. Will had never been the best shot, but it didn't matter. All he needed was a distraction. Three shots rang loud and clear, tearing the silence to shreds. The monsters didn't even spare a glance or a twitch. Onward they prowled.

"Mischa. Do you trust me?" Will asked the little girl shaking in his arms, that was barely more than black smoke at this point, terror pouring out of her in waves.

"Šalta."

There was no time to correct her. He was no Hannibal. But if it meant she would follow him, it was the only thing he needed.

"Keep close to me, Mischa," he pleaded, shielding her in his coat, no matter how futile of a protection it would offer.

Will ran. He threw himself forward, toward the door of the room, toward their freedom. He barreled into the amassed shadows, passing through them like freezing water, the small bundle that Mischa had turned into still held close to him.

He had no idea where he was going. The only thought pounding through his head was that he had to get away from their pursuers. Will ran, feet pounding on the stone floor, echoing endlessly around him. His breath filled his ears, loud and heavy.

If only he could bring Mischa to safety; somewhere outside the godforsaken castle, somewhere where they could lose the monsters that were after her blood. In front of him, the corridor stretched endlessly, bare of any doors or corners.

Three steps, five, ten, twenty, fifty, a hundred. Will lost count of them, and still no doors nor corner appeared in front of him. Just the same whiteness over and over, stretching in front and behind him, a narrow corridor without escape.

He seemed to have lost their pursuers somewhere. No other steps echoed his own, no shadow loomed in the corner of his eyes.

And then, slowly but surely the white around him began to change, gaining texture. His steps became muffled, the air became biting, the white became blinding, and suddenly Will was outside, though he hadn't stepped through any door.

Mischa had regained her shape by the time Will came to a somewhat confused halt, knee deep in pure white snow. Freezing wind whipped at his clothes, and the gnarled dead trees sagged under the weight of the glittering snow.

Will was utterly lost. He didn't know the castle's grounds well enough to be able to work out where he was. Had Mischa not been here, quietly distressed by his side, he would have thought he had left the castle and its ground far behind him.

Snow covered the world as far as his eyes could see and had no idea where he should go next when every direction looked the same. So he chose to go forward, picking up pace again, one foot in front of the other.

He walked, feet bleeding from the cold snow, blisters of cold aching all over his exposed skin as the rotten shadows of dead trees loomed over him. An eternity later, two, or maybe three, he had lost count again, focusing on the pain to fight the drowsy feeling that kept lulling him to sleep, a warm orange glow caught his eyes.

Respite! Finally! There was no Winston this time to pull him back home, no police officers to wake him from his sleepwalking. He was awake and he was alone, but maybe there would be something by the fire.

Or someone.

He imagined maroon eyes that would warm him from the inside out and pig's meat perfectly roasted over the fire.

As soon as the thought crossed his tired mind, his stomach growled and Will was hungry. So desperately hungry and cold. He needed to reach that fire. To warm his frozen fingers near the flames. To speak with another human being that was not dead.

The fire was close, so close. But there was no one by the fire when he reached it.

Only a steaming bowl of stew.

Will was hungry. So hungry. And the stew smelled so good.

His red and blistered hands had reached for the stew before he had even made a conscious decision.

There was no spoon with which to eat. Not that it mattered.

He tipped the bowl into his mouth.

Jeers and laughs burst around him.

"The bird! He ate the little bird!!!"

"The little bird isn't very filling."

"The little bird is only skin and bones."

"But you're not complaining."

The bowl tipped from his hands, still steaming, landing in the snow and melting it. Only then did Will realise that Mischa was no longer with him.

He screamed and screamed. Tears of helpness froze on his cheeks and he woke up, back in his bed, still screaming until he had nothing left in him.

Every night it went like this. A slightly different pattern. But always Will would end the night eating Mischa. No matter how far he ran or not, the putrescent monsters would catch them.

He had wanted to know Hannibal's secrets, and now that he did, he wanted it to stop. No matter the cost.

Part 4

Falling into the Atlantic hadn't been the ending Hannibal had foreseen for them. Not that he objected. It appealed to his aesthetics. What he hadn't anticipated was surviving and healing, finding a place with Will on one of the many Greek islands.

What he had expected was peace, a satisfaction borne from finally being free to live with Will, as conjoined as two souls could be.

It didn't happen. Oh it had started that way, with bodies pressed close in the dark and cramped place of the boat, blood mingling while arms held each other steady.

It hadn't lasted. Or rather, the illusion shattered as soon as they entered the house. The house with two bedrooms, as far apart as they could be. He had hoped maybe it would be an incentive for Will to come to him. That he would take one look at the distance between them and find it unacceptable.

He had miscalculated.

Silence grew and a storm began brewing behind Will's eyes. Dark clouds overshadowed Will's brows. Soon he began asking questions. Questions Hannibal wasn't ready to answer. Not now. Not yet. Not ever, if he was honest.

His past was locked, buried under the memory of the blood on his hands. He had thrown out the key long ago, and the scratching at the doors of his mind was only one more reason he couldn't open the rotting rooms, where there were more holes than floor.

Will kept asking. Prodding when his empathy was useless. Hannibal refused to give any ground.

He waited.

When Will had finally had enough, words of blame and accusation falling from his lips like poison, all Hannibal felt was disappointment. And anger.

Abigail. Abigail. It all came down to her.

Had he known she would prove herself to be such a hindrance, he wouldn't have saved her all these years ago as she lay bleeding from the wound the father who loved her so much had inflicted.

Even now Will couldn't seem to move past her. Another miscalculation. Will's living family of wife and son weren't the only one he should have tried harder to get rid of. He just hadn't counted on a dead girl occupying more space than a living one.

Liar , his mind whispered, y*ou're all too familiar with the weight of the dead that you carry everywhere with you* . After all, Mischa's very flesh had become part of him long ago.

Will had long ago vacated the kitchen, and yet Hannibal stood there, with trembling hands and a chill down his spine. The locks in his mind rattled louder, and the sunny kitchen faded around him. Looking up, he could see the towering spires of the castle, a jagged line against a bleak sky.

Hannibal clenched his hands, shaking his head to disperse the illusion. But as he looked around him, he felt no warmth. The kitchen that should have been the beating heart of their home was cold and lonely despite the summer heat creeping in slowly but surely.

Your name is Hannibal Lecter. It's 10.00 AM and you're in Kythira . He didn't have any watch to count the seconds, and the grounding mantra failed to stop the tremor or the phantom fingers that trailed down his back.

The walls were closing in on him, dark crumbling stones and plexiglas. He needed to get out, feel the sea breeze and the sun on his face.

He didn't know how long he walked alongside the rocky shore of the island, mind resolutely blank until all was silent again in his mind palace, all the locks back in place. He walked until the heat became unbearable, the air shimmering with it, and thirst made itself known.

He refused to head back, choosing instead to sit under the shade of an olive tree.

Hours later the sun began to set. Hannibal didnt move.

The stars shone above his head through the canopy of the tree, cold and distant. They were beautiful but offered no comfort.

It wasnt until the sun rose that Hannibal unfurled from his reclining position, his body protesting against the long hours spent unmoving and headed back at a sedate pace.

The house when he got back to it stood there by itself against the sea and Will was nowhere in sight. While this wasn't surprising, a sliver of disappointment embedded itself deeply in his chest.

Crossing the threshold was enough to ascertain that something else was wrong. The house was as cold as he had left it, but there was a small almost imperceptible shift, a note in the usual bouquet that was missing. It was silent too. Too still.

Hannibal resisted the temptation to check on Will's room. He knew the other man's need for space. He wouldn't go looking for him. The sun carried on its journey through the house and still there wasn't any sign of Will. Night fell and Will didn't come back.

Hannibal didn't cook this evening and went to bed feeling strangely unmoored.

Hannibal rose with the sun the next day after an unusually restless night. The house was empty and still. No Will. Pushing the door to Will's room, Hannibal was struck by the bare

white walls, the naked desk and the still-made bed. There was no sign of Will ever being here except for the lingering smell of his aftershave.

At least Will's house at Wolf Trap had been cluttered with other people's furniture alongside his papers, fishing lures and books. No such things here. A glance was enough to tell him that Will had never invested the space as his own, despite Hannibal's best intentions.

But how could he, when Hannibal had wanted Will to come to him, fill Hannibal's room with his presence, his laugh, his curls on Hannibal's pillow…

Hannibal had never wanted Will to have this room, and neither did Will, he was coming to realise.

Except they hadn't talked, had they? Both of them had chosen to wall themselves in the silence, rebuilding forts that had long been taken down.

And here they were now, Will once again out of reach and this time Hannibal had no idea where he had gone. A foreign emotion caught his chest in a vice, hands opening and closing. He needed to think, to draw, to cook, anything but contemplate the desolate emptiness of his existence now that Will was gone.

Just like he hadn't needed to step into the room to know that Will wasn't in the house, he didn't need to check the dresser to know that Will's things wouldn't be there. The lack of phone charger and the still-made bed were evidence enough.

Hannibal didn't go to sleep in his bed that night. After loitering all day, hoping for Will to appear, he finally retired for the night. But not to his room. No. He went to Will's room instead, laying on the bed and resisting the urge to turn his head just so and smell the lingering notes of Will's aftershave.

For the second time in three days, Hannibal didn't sleep. His usually quiet mind was thrown into disarray, thoughts chasing each other’s tails. He hoped Will was safe, wherever he was. Will knew how to stay under the radar and despite his anger at Hannibal, Will wasn't a stupid man.

He would give Will three days. Three days to contact him. Then Hannibal would chase after him, find him and bring him home.

Three days passed. Will didn't call.

Hannibal's phone lay on his bed, screen black and useless. Fear he refused to acknowledge had dug its claws deep into him. He had to find Will. The man had left no clues behind that might help Hannibal divine where he had gone.

Hannibal left the house before the sun rose in the sky and brought the heat with it, locking both the physical door of their home and the mental latches that had been rattling for days in his mind.

Inconvenient things.

They had been very loud ever since Will disappeared, smelling the blood in the water. Nevermind them, he had more pressing matters to attend to.

Will came before everything else, despite the man's reluctance to believe so. Not that it mattered. Once Hannibal found Will again, he would prove his devotion once again and finally make Will understand, make Will *stay* .

He took the ferry to Athens, where Will had vanished and booked a room for the night. Even watching the sun set on the Acropolis from his room, bleeding red from behind the stones, failed to inspire him to take up his sketchbook and charcoal.

Yet for a moment the sun painting the old stones red disappeared, replaced by other stones, spattered with his parents' blood. The wind carried phantom giggles to his ears and laughing reprimands of "Šalta".

Calm certainty washed over him. Of course. Will was in Lithuania. He had gone back somewhere Hannibal couldn't go. Vicious man, forcing Hannibal to confront his past, when he had successfully avoided doing so for decades. Hannibal couldn't help the smile he felt bloom on his lips as he watched the sun disappear behind the Acropolis.

Even now they kept on hurting each other. Their love had always been a vicious and violent thing as much as it had been shared tenderness.

Hannibal didn't believe in God, nor destiny, but if Will bid him to go where he had sworn not to, he would follow him.

The trip to Lithuania didn't take long, and soon the gates of the Castle loomed in front of him. In front of them stood a rusted carcass of a car and a brief flare of annoyance sparked through Hannibal at the thought of his once home desecrated by vandals and explorers.

Any distinctive sign had been weathered down by time and there was no telling who it once belonged to. By contrast the gates, though run through by vegetation, showed no sign of rust or decay. One step, two, and Hannibal was close enough to trace the medallion with his family motto and coat of arms. The metal was almost warm to the touch. He could almost feel it breathe. How peculiar.

His home seemed to hold more secrets that the ones Hannibal carried with him. How many of them had Will managed to uncover in the days he had loitered here? He had seen Will reconstruct crime scenes, slip into the minds of murderers, but never the victims, never the dead. Would his empathy work on them too? Or was death even a too great divide for Will to breach?

Hannibal pushed the gates open. They made no sound, as if they had been oiled yesterday as Hannibal crossed the threshold he had sworn never to cross again. Unlike the gates, the grounds around him were wild with bushes and overgrown vegetation. The Castle should have felt cold, frozen under snow and the unbearable weight of memory. Yet something of the Mediterranean summer seemed to have reached here, golden warmth lighting up the landscape around him.

He walked idly, guided by a young voice he had never forgotten, until he reached the fountain, now all dried up and the stone edge on which they had sat so many times before.

The corridors echoed with music and the high pitched laughter of the young. They glowed, bathed in the same golden light as the afternoon around him.

Mischa ran in front of him, lithe and little like a bird.

" *Ateikite, bróli* ," she laughed. He looked at her, as blonde as the wheat in summer when she was born. Tenderness never forgotten, but one he had never allowed himself to feel for decades, washed over him.

"Don't open the doors Mischa. There are holes in the floor. We wouldn't want you to get hurt would we?" He scolded her gently.

She looked at him with blue eyes like summer sky, guileless and so unlike Will's stormy eyes. Will. He had to find Will. Will and his crooked smile, his brilliant mind and his sharp tongue.

He seized Mischa's hand before she could unbolt the door she had walked to.

"No Mischa."

"But they are hungry, *bróli* . They want out."

Hannibal smiled at his sister.

"Is that so? Then we should give them the greeting they certainly deserve. But now isn't the time."

As soon as the words left his tongue, the corridors of his mind disintegrated around him like dust and he was back on the cold edge of the fountain. Gone was the golden light and the pleasant summer day, replaced by a sickly green glow. Looking up, he saw the Castle, not as he remembered, but as it was, rotten and decaying, all falling tiles and peeling paint.

Dampness pierced his clothes. He wasn't dressed for this weather. Neither was Will, he suspected. Neither of them had any clothes warm enough to ward off the sudden chill. The latches of his mind rattled.

Will. He had to find Will.

Making his way to the castle proved to be more arduous than expected. He didn't remember the way to be this long. Shrubs seem to fight him every step of the way. He didn't pay them any mind. Nothing would keep him from Will. Not even the man himself.

There were discussions to be had. But not here. It would pain Hannibal if he had to force Will to come with him. They were long past the point where coercion was needed and he didn't wish to go back to the days when he had denied Will his own agency.

It would not do. Instead he only had to find Will and persuade the man to come home with him where the sun would caress him like a lover and Will's smile would outshine it.

He didn't know for how long he walked but suddenly the entrance porch stood in front of him. It hadn't withstood the test of time either and it soothed something vicious in him to see his childhood home being slowly reduced to a pile of crumbling stones, soon to be swallowed by brambles and ivy.

Hannibal walked through familiar corridors, always keeping a hand on the rattling doors of his mind. No screams echoed from the closed rooms. He wouldn't let them. His steps led him to his former rooms. He was welcomed by a gaping door, hinges almost torn off.

There. On the bed lay a lump under musty covers. He didn't need to see the curls. He knew the identity of the person laying there. He had finally found Will. But before he could pull the covers, they began to shake and heave. They burst apart in an ear-splitting murder of crows, forcing him to take a step back to not get caught by a beak or a claw.

Hannibal's vision went dark. He couldn't see anything except for the black wings and his ears were ringing with the screech of the crows. Even his nose couldn't pick up any smell except rot and mould.

A hand wrapped around his arm. Hannibal spun around, for the first time in a long time mourning the scalpel he used to keep in his sleeve. He didn't have time to lash out. Before his vision was even cleared, he had his arms full. A body. Adult, male. Strong arms wrapped around him. Curls tickling his chin.

Will.

Will had found him.

A weight he had been carrying since discovering Will's barren room in their home suddenly lifted and he pressed his cheek against the curls, arm coming around the other man in a phantom of their last embrace on the cliff.

An eternity passed. He kept on holding Will, feeling the other's man shuddering breaths against him, feeling his whole body press against Hannibal's, as if he wanted to carve a place for him into it.

"Hello Will," Hannibal breathed.

A sound, almost like a sob, half choked and desperate was his only answer. Will's arms tightened around him.

"Mylimasis. Look at me."

When Will finally did, the gnarled and twisted thing that was left of his heart cracked, bleeding black blood.

Will looked awful. Worse than in the throes of encephalitis. Looking at Will now, Hannibal worried the other man would fade in his arms. Pale and thin, face devoured by deep bruise-like shadows that dimmed his beautiful eyes and hollowed his cheeks.

"What happened to you, Mylimasis?"

How easy the endearment sat on his tongue where only silence weighed before. It didn't matter that they had shattered the teacup together and it couldn't be brought together again. There were plenty of other teacups in their home. Unshattered ones made to be shared and passed tenderly from hand to hand instead.

Hannibal framed Will's pale and wan face between his hands.

"Come back, come back with me Will."

Hannibal Lecter did not beg. Yet as in many things, Will Graham was the exception. He would beg the man in his arms if it meant leaving this sickness behind. Going back to one's childhood home was not healing. It was only a way to see what was broken.

Will had learned the harsh lesson it seemed, but it brought Hannibal no joy. He watched as Will’s brow furrowed.

"Come back? Why? Why are you here Hannibal?"

"To take you home."

Will kept staring blankly at him, trying to free his face, but Hannibal kept him still.

"You left," was all Will said. "You left me and now you want to take me home? You can't have it both ways and discard me again when I push you too far. And I will. I know it."

"And yet I am not the one who crossed Europe."

Will flinched at that. The blade had slipped under his guard and drawn blood. He raised his eyes toward Hannibal again and seemed to make a decision.

"I don't want to fight. If you want to take me home, fine. But I don't think this place is done with me yet."

Not for the first time Hannibal felt the temptation to pick the bone saw again, and see what marvels Will's brain held, what it would be to see the world through his eyes.

"How do you mean?" Curiosity tickled at him. What did Will see or feel that made him look like a ghost?

Will was shivering. For the first time since their reunion, Hannibal let his gaze sweep across Will's body. He didn't like what he saw. The rest of Will's was as gaunt as his face, unnaturally so after such a brief separation.

"Never mind. Let's keep the questions for later. I assume you haven't eaten, Will?" Never mind that the kitchen mustn't be in any kind of working order. The solution to this was simple. They had to leave this place.

Will shrugged. "There's nothing to eat. There hasn't been for a long time."

A shudder passed through Hannibal.

There hadn't been food for a long time indeed. So long that you don't remember a time when your stomach wasn't gnawing on itself, tearing your bowels apart, eating you from the inside out, leaving only a hollow shell behind.

The doors rattled. The locks shook. The music stopped. Screams echoed through the corridors of his mind. Hannibal closed his ears, turned on his heels, ready to leave these old halls behind once for all.

"Come, Will," Hannibal said, lowering his hands and freeing Will. "Collect what you must and we will be on our way."

It was odd the way Will was looking at him. Part hopeful, part resigned, as if he knew something Hannibal didn't. He went to the bed where the crows had surprised Hannibal, foraging for his phone.

They made it to the stairs, into a courtyard and Will looked up.

"Better hurry. Night is falling."

It was. The already cool temperature was dipping fast. Hannibal's shirt was useless against the chill and Will fared no better. His clothes stuck to his frame, highlighting all the weight he had managed to lose during their brief separation.

Night fell. No light came from the stars and the moon was hidden, not by clouds but the primordial darkness that swallowed them whole.

"They will come soon," stated Will, voice as empty as the night. "They are too hungry to be kept away for long."

Locks rattled. Louder than before. Doors shook. Floors caved in, Misha's voice, superimposing on Will's.

"They are hungry *bróli* , they want out."

Hannibal looked at Will, pale and wan. He saw blonde locks, once the colour of wheat, faded to pale moonlight, and a smile so terribly frail.

Let them come. They wouldn't take one so precious to him ever again. Hannibal had grown teeth and claws when he tore through them the first time. They wouldn't take Will. He wouldn't let them.

He felt stretched impossibly taller, limbs thin but strong, phantom antlers reaching towards the dark sky, the monster rising to the surface, answering an unknown call and Will's eyes on him like a physical touch.

He extended a clawed hand toward Will.

"Will you come with me, love?" he asked, and Will smiled. A brilliant thing, more than enough light to guide Hannibal out of the strange limbo that is the Castle.

"Yes. I will hunt with you."

The locks in Hannibal's mind rattled one last time. The rotting doors finally gave way in a great sigh and the monsters were free to roam once again.

Part 5

Shadows pooled around Hannibal and solidified in the shape Will had come to know so well.

It was not so easy for Will. This wasn't his territory. There was no water either, no stream and the one in his mind has long since became a river of blood. But he remembered the feeling in his cell in Baltimore, how the antlers had grown from his head and spines from his back, tearing his skin and clothes apart.

He remembered when Beverly died. The feeling of being responsible, wanting and failing to protect someone dear, if only because they had believed in him. He remembered the fierce protective anger that had coursed through him.

He couldn't feel any of this anger now, only relief. It wasn't the first time he had been ensnared in a nightmare that wasn't his. But Hannibal hadn't trapped him there. He had come to free him instead. The anger and loneliness that had driven Will here faded as he looked at Hannibal.

He loved him. He loved the monster fiercely and possessively. Hannibal was his and Will would gladly help him kill his nightmares. The ghosts may have been hungry, but Hannibal was hungrier, hollowed out since childhood, a black elemental void that ate and ate yet never felt satisfied.

No antlers grew out of Will's crown, nor any spines on his back. He stayed achingly fragile and human, skin white against the dark of Hannibal's. Still, he smiled. Being human had never stopped him from being dangerous and Hannibal had known it right from the start.

They stayed in the backyard, hand in hand, and Will waited for the castle to shift around them like it did every night. It did shift. But not in the way Will had ever seen before. Lights flared all around them, golden and warm. Around them the castle was building itself back up the way Will thought it might have been before tragedy struck.

Yet Hannibal didn't have eyes for any of it, seemingly oblivious to the transformation around them. For the first time Will wondered what Hannibal saw, if his reality and Will's reality were the same, just as they had been when they slayed the dragon.

Only one way to find out, but they were running out of time. Will could already feel in his bones the creeping and hungry cold. He had no idea how to get out of this endless prison, but someone else might. Someone that Hannibal hadn't seen in a long time.

"Come. There's someone you must meet." Will tugged Hannibal by the hand still enclosed in his and led them through hallways. Where there had been nothing left but a rotting ruin before, the Castle was now aglow all around them.

Walls of decrepit paint were covered in rich tapestries woven with golden threads the colour of Mischa's hair. Will had only seen Mischa as a skeletal black ghost, but he knew that her hair must have shone like the sun once.

He trusted Hannibal. Above all, he trusted the both of them together. The terror he had experienced in these walls didn't press against his mind as much as it had before. The pressure had lessened, leaving behind a strange, floating sensation, to the point where he felt more like a ghost than a man.

A drip of colour caught his attention. There. The newly vivid red of one of the tapestries was dripping pearls of blood. On his left, the red threads unspooled like rivers of blood, cascading down the walls and yet never staining the floor.

The lights were warm, but their glow could hardly keep the dark away. Deep shadows crept along the floor, hungry tendrils made even blacker by the lit crystal chandeliers reaching out towards the golden spots of light.

Soon the hunters would come out.

"Tell me Will, is there somewhere we must be ?" Hannibal asked as if he was enquiring about the weather.

"I told you," Will replied tersely, anxiety creeping up his spine, though he wasn't afraid for himself. "You have to meet someone."

"There is no one else here, Will. Only you and me."

"You didn’t take all of the ghosts with you when you left. We are not alone."

They didn't make it to Mischa. The blood dripping from the tapestries began to coalesce into forms Will had come to know so well. But instead of ichor, they were now figures of crimson wax, their edges bleeding melted wax that never touched the floor, instead disappearing in plumes of smoke.

Hannibal must have sensed something, because his great black-antlered head slowly turned around, white eyes focusing on Will.

"Tell me Will, what do you see?" the Monster asked.

"Ghosts. Of a time out of place."

The Monster's head tilted, considering.

"Who are they, Will?"

"I do not know their names, but I know their crimes," he answered honestly, swallowing against the foreign grief that engulfed him every time he thought of Mischa.

"How intriguing. Tell me Will, what should I do about them?" Hannibal was so goddamn nonchalant about all of this. What did all this bullshit about holes in the floor of his mind and

screams behind locked doors meant if Hannibal managed to maintain such distance even now?

Through gritted teeth, Will managed to ask, "Do you see them at least?"

Hannibal smiled, fangs glinting bone white in the warm light. "I do not need to." Lightning fast, great claws as sharp and long as daggers sliced open the skull of the nearest apparition.

"The smell of putrid pig is more than enough." An animalistic howl tore through the air, soon followed by more, until silence reigned once again.

Hannibal extended a bloody claw towards Will: "Will you come with me now, *Mylimasis* ?"

Will shook his head. "I told you, there's someone you must see."

The Monster considered, "Who do you want me to meet Will?" he asked. All the anger that Will had forgotten when he had seen Hannibal again came rushing forward.

"Don't play coy, Hannibal, it doesn't suit you. You know who I want you to meet. She's waited long enough for you."

"Mischa is dead, Will."

Will could only shrug. "Yeah. And so were these guys. Didn't stop them from lingering."

"What do you know about ghosts, Will?"

As if Hannibal was the only authority on ghosts. Of the two of them, Will was the one who had to live with the Ravenstag and a hallucination of Abigail. Still, this wasn't the answer he

gave Hannibal.

"As much as you. I lived in New Orleans long enough to be familiar with them."

"Then you must know there is no reason for Mischa to linger."

Will may have been exhausted but he knew avoidance when he saw it. Hannibal didn't want to believe that Mischa was trapped here. And fine, the idea of a loved one trapped with her killers for decades unable to pass away wasn't a very palatable thought. Didn't mean it wasn't true. If Hannibal wanted to be stubborn, fine.

"As you wish, but it's the middle of the night, and I'm exhausted. We'll leave in the morning." It was an empty promise. The Castle wouldn't let go of them yet. Will was sure of it. Didn't mean he couldn't catch some sleep while they were at it.

In a strange reversal of roles, Will was the one to lead Hannibal to the bedroom where he had slept since coming here.

"The bed is big enough for two," is all Will said when Hannibal hesitated on the threshold, shedding the skin of the monster to put on the suit of the man.

Unlike Hannibal, his decision was already made. Will would take every scrap of comfort he could steal from this place until they could finally leave. Comfort right now meant sleeping in Hannibal's arms, a reminder that Hannibal came. Hannibal found him. And Will really wanted to sleep.

He pushed back the covers, and waited until the mattress dipped and Hannibal's warmth warmed him to his bones, despite the other man keeping a careful distance away. Wary of letting himself touch Will, probably. But Hannibal was here, and Will slipped into sleep instantly.

Part 6

Being allowed so near to Will, without any coercion involved, twisted something deep inside Hannibal. What an awe-inspiring thing for Will, who built forts, to invite him to sleep with him without any hesitation or fear.

Hannibal didn't sleep.

He watched over Will, the steady rise of his chest, the curls of his hair and the fluttering of his eyelashes, resisting the temptation to count them all, to catalogue every aspect of Will.

Hannibal waited until the pallid dawn crept into the room and darkness receded. Will slumbered on. Hannibal held vigil. Time passed and soon Will's eyes twitched and opened.

"Did you really watch me sleep all night?" he asked, clearly not expecting an answer. Hannibal was proven right when Will closed his eyes again and inched his way closer to where Hannibal laid, breath petrified, falling back asleep close enough for their foreheads to touch. Yet Hannibal didn't.

When Will awoke a second time, clear eyed and loose limbed Hannibal mourned the end of the shared warmth. Yet Will didn't move or try to get away from Hannibal. Instead, he reached a hand between them, and Hannibal felt a trembling finger tuck away a loose strand of hair that had fallen over his eyes.

It didn't stop there. Feather-light, it traced his face, the barely there wrinkles on his forehead, sliding along his temples to follow the slope of his cheekbones. In answer, Hannibal grabbed Will's hand. Turning it carefully to expose the inside of his wrist, Hannibal kissed the delicate pulse that beat just under the fragile skin.

"Mylimasis, do you know how I ache for you? " he breathed reverently. He heard Will's breath hitch.

"Yes," Will answered back immediately. "I ache for you just the same."

And oh. Oh. Such beautiful words from his Mylimasis' mouth. Hannibal abandoned the wrist to capture the sweet nectar of them. He pressed a chaste and tender kiss to Will's lips. They kissed without teeth, unhurriedly for a small eternity until succumbing to the temptation of earlier, Hannibal pressed his forehead to Will's.

"I want to devour you whole," he whispered and watched Will's pupils expand and darken.

"But there are matters we must resolve first," he added firmly. He felt Will sigh and nod, though he knew better than to think that their earlier disagreements had been forgotten.

They rose from the bed, Hannibal's nose wrinkling at his rumpled clothes.

Today Hannibal was the one to guide them out of the room and through the castle. Yesterday's strange, eerie spell hadn't dissipated with the dawn of a new day. Reality kept flickering in the corner of his eyes, catching the reflection of long gone lit chandeliers, feeling the softness of now frayed and moth-eaten rugs under his feet.

Will stayed silent beside him and soon they reached the door that led from the courtyard of the castle to the castle's grounds. It was locked. No amount of twisting the knob or throwing his weight against the door helped.

Glancing at Will, the other man stood there, arms crossed, waiting. His face was blank except for a raised eyebrow. Will didn't need to speak for Hannibal to know the words Will caged behind his closed lips.

"It appears we are trapped here," Hannibal finally admitted when his efforts yielded no results at all. The door could have been made of stone for all it shook under his assault. Still, Will said nothing as he stood further back in the middle of the courtyard.

"You think this place is not done with you yet, Will. It appears you are right."

"So? Will you listen to me now?"

Hannibal resisted the urge to pinch his lips in displeasure and pace the length of the courtyard. Even now, after all these years, the walls stood tall and he remembered a time when he had thought of them as Heaven's gates, too tall for any mortal to climb.

But he had grown tall and strong since then, and the walls had weathered with time. The white primer had flaked, revealing the stones and bricks underneath. Some of them had been dislodged by time, and he could see a path to the top. Stepping back from the door, he walked until he faced the wall to the right of the door.

Readying himself, Hannibal gripped the hold in front of his eyes. Or tried to. His hand slipped on the stone like water. Bemused, Hannibal looked for another hold, a bit higher on his left and repeated the action. Again his hand slipped, as if he was trying to hold onto a snake's skin and not stone.

Refusing to admit defeat, Hannibal turned his attention to the wall to the left of the door, ignoring Will's rude snort behind his back. He was sweating and the thought of smelling upset him even more than waking up in yesterday's clothes. The stones kept giving out as soon as he grabbed them and Hannibal never managed to leave the ground.

They were trapped inside the castle, unable to go further than this loggia, only separated from the outside by this insurmountable wall and the unyielding door.

Never would he admit to being wrong. The locks of his mind were broken and things that should have been kept under lock and key forever were now roaming the corridors of his mind. Emotions he hadn't felt in a long time. Fear, helplessness. This place hadn't wanted to let him go once, and it didn't want to let him go now.

He had sworn never to set foot in this Castle again. He had left it behind. If it hadn't been for Will, never would he have come back to this cursed place. First it took Mischa, and now it was trying to take Will. Hannibal turned away from the wall to face Will. The stubborn man hadn't gone back inside while Hannibal battled the wall, and only now did Hannibal realise that the man was shivering in the cold air.

He hadn't moved from his spot in the middle of the courtyard, his expression exasperated.

"You understand that you're avoiding the root of the problem, right," asked Will, as he made his way towards Hannibal. He heard Will's joints creak and the brief grimace of pain twisting Will's features was enough to tell him that his limbs must have fallen asleep from the cold.

Mischa almost fell asleep too, but you didn't let the cold take her. And it didn't. But something worse did. You still wonder if it would have been better for the cold to take her after all .

As if sensing Hannibal's dark thoughts, Will took one of Hannibal's hands and pressed it against his chest, where Hannibal could feel Will's beating heart.

"I may not be a psychiatrist," Will said gently, so gently, as if Hannibal would break, "but I know that exhausting yourself like this or killing the same people who you've already killed over and over again is not a viable solution, despite it being your preferred method for dealing with problems."

Really he didn't need Will to tell him that. Hannibal knew. But this place reeked of helplessness and adrenaline coursed through his body. He needed to do something. Anything. Killing gave him power, agency. He could kill these ghosts. After all, he had already killed them once. Killing them again and again would be easy.

He wouldn't need any weapons. His hands would be enough to crush their skulls, snap their necks or strangle them until life bled out of them. He would break their limbs one by one until the only thing they would be able to do was scream. He had no idea if ghosts could be killed the same way a human could. Hannibal flexed his hands that ached with the desire to visit retribution on these pigs.

Hannibal looked at Will's wan face, felt the cold of his freezing fingers where they kept Hannibal's hand flush against Will's heart. As angry as he was, he didn't want to risk Will's health. Not anymore. So Hannibal turned his mind away from the door.

"You have a point," Hannibal finally conceded, "and I wouldn't want you to catch a cold, *Mylimasis* . Let's go back."

Still, Hannibal kept hold of *Will' s hand* , unwilling to let go of it.

It seemed he had finally found the right words because Will's face lit up with a smile, highlighting the scar he had gotten from Dolarhyde for the first time since they had found each other again.

"Thank you. Unlike someone else, I'm *freezing* ," Will replied.

They retraced their steps through the courtyard between the two loggias towards the *corps de logis,* back to the room in silence until Will talked again.

"I saw her, you know. Not a painting, not a drawing, but *her* . "

Hannibal swallowed, eyes stinging with unshed tears. When he talked again through a throat swollen with emotion, words came pouring.

"She was beautiful, light on her feet and small like a sparrow. She was mischievous and brought light wherever she went. She loved being outside but would insist on wearing pretty dresses and ribbons that would inevitably turn muddy."

"A little bird," whispered Will, eyes haunted. He shivered. Refocusing, he stared straight at Hannibal, barring the entrance to their shared room.

"I don't know what you did Hannibal, but you trapped her here. She's as much a prisoner as we are and it's unfair. I've seen her, hell I've lived what she's been going through, and I've nearly gone insane."

"You have made your point, Will. Now please let me pass. You are not the only one who is cold and I would very much like to get back to the room." But Will didn’t let him.

"I can't do anything, Hannibal. I can relive what she's been going through but I'm powerless. Empathy is a mirror, allowing me a glimpse, nothing more."

Will words struck him, invoking a powerlessness he had known too well.

"At least consider what I said, okay?" Will asked, before relenting and allowing Hannibal to cross into the room.

They huddled under the covers, desperate to share some warmth, both of them lonely and aching for the other. But silence hung heavy over them. They laid together but they did not touch, distance restored between them once again.

It was impossible to tell how much time passed in silence, the dull daylight never changing. It was suffocating, and if not for the chill, Hannibal was sure Will would already have fled the bed. Yet it was Will who broke the ice.

"Trust me on this one, okay?" Hannibal refused to acknowledge him. Will was, as he had said, an outsider. He couldn't understand.

"Hannibal, please. Trust me," Will pleaded again, "Mischa may not be mine, but I love her, because *you* do. And I can't bear to see her suffer any longer. We are also trapped and won't be able to leave until you've sorted this out."

Hannibal was a logical man, Will's words made sense, no matter how much he disliked them.

"Very well, Will. I shall try," he relented at last.

"That's all I ask of you," Will said, relief colouring his words, fingers already seeking Hannibal's to fasten their hands together.

"And remember, we are in this together."

Part 7

Night had fallen again and the light from candles extinguished long ago flared up again, bathing the castle in a warm glow that did nothing to keep the creeping frost at bay.

If Will was to be believed, there was no need to explore the castle. Mischa would come to them. With a wry smile, he had admitted that ghosts seem to flock toward him. Despite the possessive part of Hannibal that had claimed Will as his and refused to share him, he wasn't surprised that ghosts, like killers, were attracted to the brilliant flame of his empathy.

It didn't take long. Resting side by side on the bed, back against the headboard, they watched as the shadows on the wall grew longer, stretching and bending out of shape until they tore off from the ground, a floating mass of writhing darkness that began to coalesce in a funeral black dress barely concealing the utter lack of flesh on the skeletal shape it draped over. She was all skin and bones, as black as her attire, and she floated in the middle of the room, suspended in the air, her hair a halo around her head.

Starvation and death had carved away almost all recognisable features, leaving behind empty sockets in a too small skull. Yet he would know her anywhere. He had petted and brushed her hair enough times to know the exact curve of her head. He had sketched her enough, rough sketches drawn in a young hand, to recognise the shape of her, distorted as she was in death.

She was there. Will had been right after all.

"Mischa," he breathed, reverently. The ghost who until now had been completely unaware of her surroundings snapped to attention, the rolling mass of shadows losing their shape before reforming into Mischa just at the foot of the bed.

" *Bróli* !!!" Her voice should have matched her appearance, gravely and sepulchral. Instead it rang.

Will disentangled himself from Hannibal, leaving him to mourn the warmth and the proximity of Will's warm body pressed against him.

"I'll leave you two together," Will said, already up, smoothing the indentation his body left on the bed. Turning to Mischa, Will gifted her with a smile while he added, a feral glint in his eyes, "If the Bad Men come, I'll take care of them. I may not have a gun, but that hasn't stopped me from killing monsters before. Just ask your brother."

Had Hannibal not been in love with Will before, he would certainly have fallen now, seeing Will in all his awakened splendour. Never had the urge to devour Will whole been so strong, eclipsing all other hunger, it filled him to the brim. Will must have seen something in his eyes because he smiled that crooked smile that he only bestowed on *Hannibal* and no one else, before disappearing through the doors.

"He was lonely *bróli,* and sad. The Bad Men knew it. They tried to take him, too."

His hands clenched around the comforter they had been resting on, crushing the velvet fabric, lips curling back in anger.

"For this affront alone, I should have killed them a thousand times again," the Beast growled.

"I died a thousand times too," Mischa said, voice forlorn. "Every night, the Bad Men came. And they took me. It's been so long, *bróli* . Why didn't you come?"

Mischa had no eyes left to weep, but black ichor trickled from empty eye sockets. There was only one answer he could give her. She deserved the truth after all.

"I couldn't. I locked the doors of my mind once I had finished avenging you and punishing your killers. I couldn't protect you. It is my greatest regret and my greatest failure."

Mischa's once lovely face contorted into an agonised grimace.

" *Bróli* , you're hurting me," Mischa wailed. Hannibal's heart broke in two, long forgotten tears wetting his eyelashes.

He made a move to hug Mischa like he did when they were young, to engulf her in his arms and save her from the world. His hand went through her like mist. Never again would he hold her, her spirit may have been there but her body was no more.

"This was never my intention," Hannibal admitted, hands balled into fists to resist the temptation to reach for her once more.

"I only ever wanted the best for you. But even now, it seems I am failing my duties as an older brother. Tell me what I should do."

"Your heart knows what you should do, *bróli* . But you won't see."

Leaning back against the creaking headboard of the bed, Hannibal contemplated the ghost of his sister. Will's words echoed in his mind. The other man had been adamant that he should see Mischa. Will hadn't given any explanation so Hannibal turned his mind to understanding the riddle both Will and Mischa had apparently found the answer to.

This wasn't punishment. Will may have wanted him to suffer, but the other man didn't relish in gratuitous cruelty. His love was a cruel and capricious god, but never would he have made Hannibal suffer seeing Mischa in this state for no reason. This wasn't a ploy to get Hannibal to forgive Mischa's killers either. They deserved their fate, and knowing Will, his Mylimasis would smile and agree, eyes savage.

There was nothing to forgive Mischa for either. She had been young, so young. Too young for the fate that befell her. Mind churning, Hannibal couldn't say how much time passed while he ruminated. The other ghosts had made no appearance so far. Will must have made good on his promise to keep them at bay.

Mischa's ghost was still floating by the foot of the bed, suspended in time, as if waiting for Hannibal's attention to bring her back to life again. Realisation dawned on him. He was the

one who had kept her alive, denying it and locking her in the furthest corners of his mind, where he could no longer hear the wind howl or feel the cold eating at his flesh and bones.

"I happened to myself," he had once told Will. It wasn't the only lie that he'd told Will, far from it, but it may have been the only one not aimed at Will but *himself* . Mischa had happened to him.

No matter how stubbornly he blinded himself, he could never forget the taste of the stew as it was presented to him. The warmth of it, how strength came back to his frozen limbs, only to be brought back to earth by the howls of laughter and his reality had shattered into a thousand shards all around him.

Even now his whole body shuddered at the memory. The phantom smell of the brew assaulted his nose. His stomach heaved, he felt nauseous. Lurching from the bed, he sat before Mischa, so they were the same height.

"Please forgive me. I hadn't meant to make you suffer even more," Hannibal whispered, feeling the wet tracks left behind by the tears that rolled down his cheeks. Mischa smiled, an echo of the lovely bright thing it had been years ago.

"I forgive you *bróli* . Will you forgive yourself too?"

Oh . So this was what Will had been trying to tell him. His Mylimasis had seen right through it all along. The Castle wasn't done with them yet because Hannibal wasn't.

"You ask for hard things little sister, but for you, I will try."

The bright smile he had loved so much lit up her face again. Her complexion lightened and flesh returned to her bones, her hair turned golden and suddenly she was exactly as he remembered her years ago. As he watched, she began to fade like dew touched by the first morning rays until there was nothing left but a fleeting sensation of warmth despite the fact Hannibal was still knelt on the cold stone floor.

All around him the illusion of splendour evaporated, first the vivid colours of the tapestries and bed linen turned dull, the gleaming appliances tarnished under dust and cobwebs, the floor cracked until Hannibal was left alone in the empty husk of his former home.

Dimly he registered the sound of footsteps, the rustle of clothes, the heat of another's presence. He hadn't realised he was still crying until he felt the gentle press of lips against the corner of his eyes.

"I don't know what you did, but it must have worked. They are gone Hannibal," a familiar voice stated. Will. Hannibal had been wrong. He wasn't alone. Not anymore. Still he turned his face away, unwilling to let Will bear witness to his weakness.

"None of that," he heard Will mutter, "don't hide from me anymore, not after everything." So he allowed Will to manoeuvre him until they locked eyes.

"I want to see you break," Will told him plainly, "maybe not now, maybe in a couple of days, or months, or years, in an otherwise unremarkable moment and see you get overwhelmed by these memories. But more than that I want to be here when you rebuild yourself, and I want to hold your hand while you lay down your foundations again, more solid than ever before. "

His limbs were heavy, he had no strength left. Worst of all was the numbness that permeated him, the knowledge that Mischa may be at peace but he had to say goodbye to her twice and never again would he see her or hear her. He collapsed against Will, a puppet whose strings had been cut. Strong arms closed around him and Hannibal welcomed the abyss of oblivion that called to him, finally secure in Will's arms.

The first thing he was aware of when he came to was the cold that had seeped from the floor through his clothes and spread to his whole body. The second thing was the ache of his knees and back. He was past the age of sleeping on the floor. The third thing he knew was the steady rise and fall of the chest under his head.

In a reversal of position, Will was now the one to watch him wake up.

"I have no idea what time it is, but the sooner we are out of here, the better I'll be," he grumbled. Hannibal chuckled.

"Yes. I believe our time here has come to an end." Disentangling himself from Will, he rose from the floor, as joints cracked and popped.

"Come back home with me, Mylimasis," Hannibal said, extending a hand to Will who was still on the floor, slumped against the wall for support.

"I thought you'd never ask," he said, gripping Hannibal's hand with all his strength.

This time when they left, the castle didn't hold them back and they soon passed the gates of Lecter's castle for the last time.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

That's the end! Thank you to everyone who took the time to read, kudo and/or comment. I hope you enjoyed the ride.

There is a tale whispered in the forests from Lithuania to Greece of a Great Black Beast and a man born of the sea. They say they could be seen sometimes, walking hand in hand when the mist hangs heavy in the air and the path is hidden.

If you are polite, or leave an offering, fireflies will light up your path and the man and the Beast will let you go, never to be seen again.

If you make the mistake of forgetting your manners or ordering them, the man and the Beast will smile, and you will be the one never to be seen again.

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